MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.
Series IV: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.
Sub-series A: Books, 1961-1990, undated.

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, fourth draft, chapters 1-4, edited and retyped versions, undated.

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Chapter 1

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

Our discussion began with challenge.

- Being Jewish of being Christian ought to make a difference, but I can't see that it does. The Jacksons lived next door. I went tc Sabbath School and John went to Sunday School, but as far as I can tell the cnly difference in our upbringing was that I got presents on Chanukah and he on Christmas. We were raised with the same rules. We went to the same schools. We took out the same girls. We liked the same music. We cared about the environment and Vietnam. We were different, of course, everyone is; but it was not because I was a Jew and he a Christian. Perhaps if I had been raised in an orthodox home and gone to a day school I might not feel this way, but I wasn't. I didn't, and I don't think of Jew as anything but a label. Being a Jew is only a small part of me, and not a particularly important part; I don't see why I should spend much time worrying about an identity which is little more than a label.

- If I ever need a religion I'll look around until I find one that fits my needs. Until then, I'll reserve judgement.

You don't acquire a religion by shopping around and picking up whatever happens to catch your eye. A religion, your family's religion, is lodged in your soul long before you ever know religion is an issue you can think about. When we think about religion, we cannot erase the imprint of our background and experience. A religious identity is not something you put on and take off at will. Our ideas and attitudes change, we're not prisoners of the past; but in all probability the suit that catches our eye will be cut in a not unfamiliar pattern.

I make up my mind. In college I chose my major. When I left college I chose my career. I chose my wife. I chose not to enter a family business. My family's faith was not held over me. In my own way I'll choose my faith.

Did you see a Francois Truffaut film called The Wild Child? It's about an infant who was abandoned by his parents and raised by wolves. When he was about

nine, some farmers found him wandering in the woods. At that point he was not only illiterate and fearful of human contact but unaware that he could use speech to communicate his needs. His environment had been wild and so was he.

- But that's a movie.

It was based on an actual case. Without family, schools, books, music, friends, the best and brightest among us would remain an illiterate primitive. Our reach is circumscribed by what others do for us and the opportunities society makes available to us. Our lives are as rich in opportunity as they are because others created the stuff of civilization. There are no self-made people. George Bernard Shaw said it with customary verve: "Independence, that's middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth."

- If you're saying be a Jew because your parents are Jews, I won't buy. I don't live the way my parents do. We have different tastes in music and art. We don't agree on many things. If I don't accept their politics, and I don't, why should I accept their religion?

You've mistaken my point. I'm not arguing that you have no choice but to follow in your parents' footsteps, if that were true we wouldn't be having this discussion, You spent your most impressionable years in their home and, like it or not, you've been deeply influenced by them.

So?

Your thinking about religion will always be influenced by your conditioning. I've studied many religions. I understand Judaism. Induism, despite a good bit of study, remains a definable abstraction.

- I could leave Judaism without ever looking back..

Don't be so sure. Bertrand Russell lost his belief in Christian doctrine as an undergraduate and never found any reason to return to the fold. Yet, in his Autobiography, he talks of a visit to Athens during which he found, to his surprise, that a small Byzantine church meant more to him than the Parthenon. His unexpected

reaction made him realize how much his upbringing had influenced his attitudes. He would always be a citizen of the Christian world and ar outsider, albeit an informed one, in other cultures.

- People do change. Conversion is not uncommon.

It's not easy to become someone else. Conversions are often quite traumatic.

- Why bother with religion at all? I can't stand sham. I choke every time I read of those Washington prayer breakfasts where senators, lobbyists, and generals begin the day with bowed heads, asking God to give them the strength to spend the rest of the day manipulating the levers of power.

How do you know that these people are hypocrites?

- Either they're hypocrites or they don't know what religion's all about.

You're simply saying that you don't like politics and politicians.

- They're hypocrites. I remember that when the negotiations at Camp David about a Near Eastern peace were completed a public ceremony was organized at the White House for the formal signing of the accords. At that time each of the heads of state, Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat made an appropriate speech in which he quoted the same few lines from Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore." The next day Sadat and Begin went up to Capitol Hill to ask Congress to sell more arms to their respective military forces, and Carter held a press conference in which he explained the treaty in the cold terms of geo-politics.

Politicians have been known to use Biblical texts for effect, but that doesn't prove that they're hypocrites. Most, I'm sure, believe their position to be principled. In the situation you cite, I remain convinced that these three men spoke from the heart. Each is a confirmed believer, in fact a rather traditional believer. Jimmy Carter taught Sunday School for years. Menachem Begin practices orthodox Judaism, and Anwar Sadat followed the Sunni tradition of Islam.

- Then explain, if you can, the quick shift from peact talk to Pentagon talk.

- The major religions teach that as long as the world remains unredeemed, idealist must be married to prudence.

- After his speech Isaiah didn't rush off to a session of Judah's National Defense Council.

Isaiah was a prophet, not a bureaucrat. Moreover, he was describing a utopian future, not setting out an agenda for scheduled arms reduction talks.

- How do you know that?

From his language. The plowshares and pruning hooks speech begins: "It shall come to pass in the End of Days." In Biblical Israel 'the End of Days' was a specific term which designated the era of everlasting peace which would begin when God put an end to the familiar world and created a new world in which "the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them."

- You're complicating a simple issue. If those who claim to be religious don't work for peace, they're hypocrites. Bombs and religion don't mix.

Judaism was the first major religion to project the vision of universal peace, but our sages also taught: 'if one comes to kill you, kill him first.' A dead peacemaker is no longer a peacemaker. Until the Messiah comes, I'll pressure our government to negotiate arms reduction, the arms race is a costly and suicidal folly, but I'll not advocate unilateral disarmament.

- I guess we mean different things by religion. Define your terms.

Harvey Cox describes religion as "that cluster of memories and myths, rites and customs, ideas and institutions, that pulls together the life of a person or group into a meaningful whole." The religious need, the need to feel that what we're doing makes sense, is as basic and essential to our happiness as the need to love and be loved. We need to feel that the way we live is appropriate, that our commitments have been intelligently chosen, and that our actions will be consequential. We need to feel that there is more to life than eating, sex,

work, illness and the grave. I didn't choose to be born. I would prefer not to die, but I can't do much to prevert it. I want to know why I'm alive and why so many confusing things happen to me. Our religion, any religion, assures its communicants that a certain kind of life is the right way to live and that if they follow certain instructions they'll be putting our days tc good use. I could give you a number of sophisticated definitions of religior, but you'll understand if I quote Salvador de Madriaga: "Religion is all that we do to prove to ourselves that God is not mad." Religions are the cultural entities which allow us to affirm and confirm life's inherent meaning. We can't do without this support.

- I could. I do. I'm not religious.

- I'm a a person. I don't accept any religion. They're all products of someone's imagination.

Facts are useful only if we can fit them into a pattern. Without a religion which sanctifies a particular pattern of ideas and values, your facts are of little use to ycu. Everyone's got a religion. Psychologists speak of the will to believe as one of the givens of our emotional makeup.

- I don't allow myself to believe in anything I can't see, touch or quantify. I'm not religious. My motto is: 'show me.' I accept nothing on faith.

Do you believe in love, beauty, joy?

- Love, beauty and joy are feelings everyone experiences. They're universal. Religion isn't. I've never had a religious experience and no one I know has. Most so-called religious experiences are simply forms of self-hypnosis or mass hysteria.

Then you'd dismiss mystics like Ezekiel, the Buddha, or Francis of Assissi as victims of their own illusions.

- Yes. I'm sure they honestly believed they had seen God or heard God's voice, but they hadn't. They simply had an emotional high.

- I don't agree. I'm sure that there are spiritual sensitives. Religion's a special talent, like a musical ear, but it's not, as you claim, a universally

experienced need. I don't need religion. I think many people don't.

Mysticism is to religious feeling as ecstasy is to love. It involves a heightening of a basic emotion. For most of us most of the time religion and love operate at fairly low emotional temperatures. The feeling is there, but we're not that conscious of it. In most of us religion is simply a reassuring sense that a particular vision of life is valid. Our religious feelings are those which reassure us that life isn't a pointless journey. Love involves a world of a wide range of feelings, from tenderness to passion. Religion also includes a range of feelings from quiet confidence to ecstatic affirmation.

- Feelings can have no basis in reality. Love is often blind to the fact that those we adore aren't what we take them to be. The fact people have religious feelings doesn't prove that God exists.

- I don't believe in God.

Belief in God isn't the only redemptive idea which can inform a religion. Some religions are theistic. Others are not.

- Why do you insist everyone needs a religion?

Because otherwise we'd all be made. I'm not talking now of the published teachings of a recognized religious body, some religions have such texts, others do not; but of that cluster of ideas, values and hopes which our religion endorses and which we, therefore, "know" to be right and accept on faith. I'm talking about that cluster of ideas and institutions which certify to us that our lives have meaning.

- You can't call me religious. I'm not a believer and I feel no particular need to believe.

Do you feel a need to order your life?

- I look to science, not religion, to give me answers. Science is order. Religions, with their myths and creeds, simply add to the confusion.

Science certainly sees the order which explains causation: how the natural world operates. I'm talking about a purpose, the purpose of your life and mine,

an entirely different kind of order.

- I look on religion as a form of sophisticated magic. Religion says light candles or make a pilgrimage and you'll get into Heaven. Lighting a candle won't help you get anywhere unless the lights have gone out in your house.

You're talking about religious forms and I'm talking about the function of religion. I agree that blessing the Sabbath lights won't earn me Brownie points with God, but reciting the blessing can, and often does, remind me that I don't have to live in the shadows. There is enlightenment, learning. As the flames rise, so do my hopes. I know there is no direct cause and effect relationship, but I feel better.

- Lighting candles or keeping kosher won't get you into Heaven.

Heaven represents all our dreams. I don't believe that there's any such place, but I need to dream. I need to acknowledge life as more than a brief and hapless interlude between the cradle and the grave. Religions are in the encouragement business and that's why you'll find Heaven in so many of the myths of the world's religions.

- Precisely, and it's all pie in the sky - a con game.

Not at all. Hope is necessary to life. Life's not an easy road and often down and we need the promise of our religion to keep us going. Hope is life. That's why everyone has this need to believe. Without hope we'd give up, our spirit would wither on the vine. But I'll not argue that there's such a place as Heaven.

- There's no Heaven and there's no Messiah. It's all pie in the sky.

We think in images and the world's religions have coded the sense of promise in a variety of myths: Heaven, utopia, Messiah, Nirvana, Kingdom of God. The older promises emphasized some miraculous transformation. People couldn't imagine that they could make for themselves a better life on earth. As we lost some of our need for miracles, as science and technology changed the terms of human life,

the old images lost some of their power. The promises became more "creditable." Instead of Heaven people talked of a just and peaceful society here on earth. As new religions have come on the scene, they have denied God any role in their vision. Marxism promises Heaven on Earth created by the working classes supported by the iron laws of history.

- The Messiah hasn't come. He couldn't. He never was. He's a myth.

The Messiah hasn't come, may never, but for centuries this hope lifted the spirits of millions.

- It was an illusion.

The messiah was no more or less than a personification of hope, and hope is a life-enhancing mood - quite real.

- My problem is not with the ancient myths but with our modern ones. Messianic Age talk is just as pie-in-the-sky as messiah talk. Hope is just that - a promotion. The priests talked of a messiah to keep the poor from complaining too much and from doing something about their lot. Marx realized this, but his disciples are using his vision in just the same manipulative kway.

The priests believed in the messianic oracles every bit as much as the laity. Those liberal Jews of the last century who created the term Messianic Age honestly believed that Pollyana was right and that the world was well on its way into such an age. Religious hopes reflect a society's will to believe that life is a challenging and significant journey rather than a pointless endurance contest. Without hope and a vision - in other words, a religion - each day is a burden. Caught up in a vision, each day becomes an opportunity.

- Or a frustration.

Better frustration over a goal unattained than the numbness of a life devoid of all purpose. We need a reason to get up in the morning.

- But that reason doesn't have to be a religious one.

What else can it be?

- I believe in the mind and research, and in the possibility of political and

social reform. My hopes have nothing to do with religion.

Oh, but they do.

- They're based on what I've learned and experienced, not on what Judaism has taught me.

Your hopes, like mine, are based on unprovable assumptions.

- Not so.

What makes you think that science will be our salvation and not our damnation? Nuclear weapons scare the hell out of me.

- Me, too, but I believe, and most of my friends do, too, that we can control anything we can invent. We believe in the capacities of the human spirit.

Then you're religious. You've just given me the first plank of your creed.

- You're giving religion such a broad definition that I'm no longer sure what you mean. I'll agree everybody needs to believe in something, but my beliefs have nothing to do with prayer, ritual or holidays, the paraphernalia of religion. Religion, as I understand the term, represents faith organized institutionally. I'm not an institution person. Organized religion divides people. Look at Ireland, Iran and the Middle East.

You're tilting with windmills. You can't separate religion from people and the human being is a social animal. An Abraham, Paul or Mohammed may express a new and compelling vision, but since we're social animals, not isolates, inevitably others are caught up in it, and since the new ideas need to be taught, its themes need to be celebrated and its teachings have to be put into practice as organization emerges.

- Look at the harm religions do, the Crusades, the Inquisition, Arab 'holy' wars.

Religious leaders are people. Some are saints. Some are power brokers. Religions consist of groups who share a particular vision and are moved by certain symbols and traditions. We need to share our hopes so, inevitably, every compelling religious message goes public.

- And when it does it becomes commercial. A rabbi or a priest is just another guy earning a buck.

Who probably could have chosen other and easier ways to make a living.

- The problem with religions is that they never let people alone. Some self-appointed guardian of public morals is always saying, "you can't read this book" or "you can't have an abortion."

Human behavior is so full of contradictions that such a term as 'never' is almost always excessive. Some religious groups promulgate their views by heavy-handed coercion, others by gentle example. Some aggressively convert the unenlightened. Others teach respect for the views of others. Protestantism gave us Prohibition and Sunday Blue Laws and our country's strong bias in favor of the integrity of the individual conscience.

- Protestants are now demanding that the school day begin with prayer and that Genesis I be made part of the science curriculum.

Some denominations lobbied for the prayer amendment. Others opposed it. The same is true of Creationism. Religions are not monolithic. American Protestantism includes the Moral Majority who see themselves as reincarnation of the Watch and Ward societies which policed Puritan New England and the National Council of Churches which has been accused of supporting revolutionaries and advocating a "new morality."

- Some rabbis testified in favor of the Prayer Amendment.

More were vigorously opposed. Religious communicants generally share the forms, vocabulary and calendar, but they often interpret these quite differently. Those who favor the amendment argue that traditional Judaism support parochial education and that our schools need to have a clear sense of purpose and that only a faith rooted in God can provide that sense of purpose. Those who are opposed

say that traditional Judaism was an effective response to a world which no longer exists and doubt that school prayer would strengthen the student's moral fibre and emphasize the importance of the separation doctrine in our society.

- The Prayer Amendment is an unwarranted intrusion of the State into a matter of private conscience.

I agree, but others obviously don't.

- Then they're wrong.

Remember that political decisions are not like mathematics where every problem has only one right answer. Your decision in a policy matter will depend on your presuppositions. We happen to believe that the State should not interfere in matters of conscience. Others believe supporting public morals is one of the State's primary functions.

- I'n glad Judaism supports the separation of church and State.

It doesn't. Traditional Judaism asserts that the basic rule of a Jewish community should be the halacha, religious law. The religious parties in Israel seek to reestablish the halacha's authority over the Jewish state.

- That's not your view.

Not at all. Non-orthodox Judaism exists in no small measure because the older political theory began to seem to many as an inappropriate policy for those Jews who lived in an open and secular society.

- I can still remember my shock when I learned in a Jewish Studies Seminar that the early rabbis deliberately set aside all the writings of the Greek-speaking Diaspora. Until then I'd never associated Jews with censorship.

- Chaim Weizmann in his biography describes how he hid his first science texts inside a large Talmud folio for fear that the Melamed would discover he was reading forbidden books and beat him for wasting his time.

The modern synagogue has been remarkably open-minded. We believe in the separation doctrine, assume the value of cultural pluralism, and wouldn't dream of publishing a list of acceptable movies.

- There is never any excuse for censorship.

Again, that unfortunate 'never.' Both examples we've cited occurred during periods of great stress and danger, when leaders feared that Judaism might drown in a sea of unJewish ideas.

- Weizman's physics primer didn't threaten anyone.

It wasn't the one book that worried his teachers. It represented a new and frightening cultural world to which they had been suddenly exposed and which they didn't understand. Anything new is unsettling.

- You can't deny science. No one can.

True, and within a generation of the time Weizman had his knuckles slapped, schools run by the traditional community like Yeshivah University had developed major departments in all the sciences.

- Censorship seems to attract religious folk. The Roman Church forced Galilec to recant. The Amsterdam Synagogue excommunicated Spinoza.

The believer has a problem. Religions exist to corfirm certain values ard they obviously can't do that if they treat all values evenhandedly. People can truly be open-minded only about ideas which are not central to their lives. The believer takes it for granted that one's ideas should be encouraged and promul-gated and that ideas which conflict with his cherished convictions deserve little attention and less support.

- By that logic your liberalism suggests a lack of convictions.

Not so much a lack of convictions, I've got some rock-firm principles, but impatience with dysfunctional forms. In a medieval universe of church-states, the halacha as the norm for a segregated Jewish community was the only way to go. In our open social order the halacha often seems heavy-handed.

- That's what I've been saying. Religions stifle progress because they want us to obey rather than open our minds to new ideas.

A religion without convictions is a contradiction in terms. Religions are valuable to us precisely because they reinforce our commitment to certain prin-

ciples. The familiar image of God revealing the law to Moses is, among other things, a dramatic image of Judaism's ability to settle for us, once and for all, the debate over what is right or just.

- You're right, at least on the emotional level. I know I don't believe God gave the Torah to Moses, but I somehow feel reassured about myself whenever the rabbi opens the ark and the Torah is there.

- You agree then with me that religious folk have closed minds.

Some do. Not all. A religion may consecrate respect for other views as part of its creed.

- I don't know any creed that begins, 'I am committed to open-mindedness.'

No one is completely open-minded. We all have convictions which we won't willingly compromise. Whenever we take a stand we close down part of our mind. Many of my friends who pride themselves on being open-minded don't understand that their lack of interest in Judaism or Christianity, their open-mindedness, is not continued in the fierce political convictions where they are ideologues of unshakable conviction.

The problem is not the lack of open-mindedness, but whether a religion is organized around life-enhancing or unhealthy values. What we "know" to be right, what our religion affirms to be right, may restrict our spiritual growth and deny justice to many in our community. Think of all those Afrikaaners of the Dutch Reform Church who "know" that apartheid is right. On the other hand, think of all those church and synagogue members who took part in the Civil Rights marches and who "know" that the arms race is the ultimate folly.

- Again, you're labeling as religious ideas which have nothing to do with religion.

You can't separate religious values from the religious vision and that vision will inevitably affect the way we think about all aspects of our lives.

- I'll say it again - I don't believe in any religious ideas. I don't believe in a personal God, in life after death, or that if I prayed my prayers would

be answered.

You believe in political freedom and democracy. On what basis do you hold these convictions?

- Freedom and democracy aren't religious ideas. They're self-evident propositions.

Plato wouldn't agree. A billion Chinese believe that social harmony, not personal initiative, is the ideal and that the individual has no inalienable rights. Chairman Mao taught: "We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness. . "to proceed in all cases from the interests of the people and not from one's sold interest." A member doesn't tell the commune what he wants to do. Tasks are assigned. Such collectivist assumptions are no more demonstrable than those individualistic values you cherish; and both sets of values are, in fact, religious positions though both you and Mao, or his ghost, will object to the label.

- How did Chinese Communism get into this conversation? We're discussing religion, not politics.

Maoism meets Cox's definition. It supports in China a cluster of ideas and institutions which consecrate a particular set of actions as necessary and redemptive.

- Mao closed China's temples. He removed Confucius' writings from the schools. Communism is anti-religious.

True, but at the same time it's a religion. In both China and the Soviet Union portraits of "saints" hang high in vast ceremonial halls, and people by the millions make pilgrimages to the mausoleums which contain the bodies of their patriarchs. In both countries a consecrated scripture is interpreted officially, and anyone who questions the received dogma is condemned as a heretic. Books are censored. All schools are parochial. The formation of a person's faith is carefully supervised by a zealous clergy of party faithful. There is even a messianic promise: the great day when the contradictions of history will be resolved and an age of classless joy will envelop the earth. Marx and

Mao prided themselves that their philosophy was uncompromisingly materialistic and damned religion as an opiate by which the privileged keep the masses tranquil and passive, but their disciples have established a state-church which, formally at least, seems like a recreation of the medieval church-states of Europe.

- I've always thought of religion as something to be encouraged, as by definition good, useful in shaping character and moral sensitivity. If I accept your claim that Communism is a religion, then I have to accept the idea that some religions may be quite dangerous.

Most of us grew up in a country where the power of religion was constitutionally circumscribed and so we associate religion with the beauty of a sanctuary; the hush of a congregation and noble thoughts rather than with clerics and commissars who tell us what we can't do and force us to do what they prescribe. Every religion has a darker side and many religions confirm the wrong kinds of values. A religion is, by definition, neither good or bad, but simply the shared faith and practice of a particular group. Communism is a religion because tens of millions find that its ideas give a sense of purpose and hope to their lives, not because its informing ideas are necessarily life enhancing.

- By your definition Naziism would qualify as a religion.

Naziism displayed most of the features we associate with a certain kind of apocalyptic religion: a strong faith in a charismatic leader; total commitment to a set of values which are held to be of ultimate importance; absolute certainty that there is only one truth and that all error must be suppressed; grand public pageants at holy shrines like Nuremberg; a bible, Mein Kampf; a messianic vision of a redeemed world purified by Aryan leaders. In its heyday Naziism presented a collection of myths, rites, customs, ideas, and institutions which pulled together and certified the aspirations of much of the German nation.

- If Naziism fits your definition, I'm more convinced than ever that the world would be better off without religion.

Religion is a natural and inescapable element of our lives, not an option we can exercise or not. Religions exist everywhere and affect everyone, even those who find it hard to think of themselves as religious. No one and no group is religion-less because we are thinking creatures who can't thrive or even survive without a sense of purpose.

- The Nazis were storm troopers, brutes. I find it hard to think of them as having religious personalities.

Define what you mean by a religious person.

- One who takes faith seriously and who lives by his faith.

The Nazis were true believers.

- Someone who is affiliated with a congregation.

The Nazi Party was their congregation. You signed up. There were membership dues. There were regular meetings at which hymns were sung, a collection taken up, and loyalty pledged.

- If Satanic ideas like those of the Nazis are religious, why are we encouraged to be religious?

Americans are remarkably naive about religion. We've had little first-hand experience with the psychopathology of religion. We've never had a religious war in our country. Ignorant of history and associating religion with our parents and a few holidays, we innocently identify religion with motherhood, family, and pacifism rather than with the all-white churches of the south, the Scopes Trial, Father Coughlin and the cross burnings of the Klan.

- If you're right and everyone of us is caught up in the web of some religion, how do we ever gain enough perspective to be able to judge critically? Obviously, there are religions we ought to bail out of as quickly as possible.

God gave us each a mind as well as a heart; and, fortunately, intelligence and feeling operate somewhat independently. You can fall desperately in love and yet know that your beloved is not right for you. The trick is never disconnect your heart from your mind.

- You said it yourself: a believer doesn't reserve judgement and a sceptic isn't a believer.

It's not quite that black and white. We can't jump out of our skins or our psyches, but we're also not prisoners of conditioning. Many do succeed in making judgements, but it's not easy. The higher one turns to his religious enthusiasm, the less likely that he will be able to hear and appreciate other voices.

- There's a way out - not to be taken in. I'm an agnostic.

Which means that you're not sure about God. Being an agnostic doesn't prove that you haven't some non-theistic religious beliefs. Everyone has.

- So what's my religion?

American civil religion.

- There's no American civil religion church in my town. There's no such thing.

Not all religions organize themselves into congregations. America's civil religion consists of the cluster of ideas and hopes which are affirmed and celebrated by our nation's institutions and calendar, consecrated in its Torah, the Constitution, and broadly shared by the citizenry.

- You're talking about culture, not religion.

Religion is an inseparable part of a community's culture. That's what I was trying to say when we talked about the First Amendment. When the secular state emerged in modern times and active membership in the well-known religions was reduced to its communicants, the state developed a mystique and values of its own and in pluralistic societies like ours the institutions of the nation-state began to provide the religious confirmation which the non-affiliated required.

- What does this supposed religion teach?

Some have described America's civil religion as a secular humanism which affirms social justice: the autonomous individual, the Bill of Rights, public welfare, the work ethic, and human brotherhood. That's the touched-up picture. The civil religion, like all religions, also has a darker side: intense individual-

ism, happiness through having, and a tendency towards extravagant chauvinism. Its Shema is President Kennedy's famous motto: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. . ." Its holidays are the Fourth of July, the second Tuesday in November, and Thanksgiving Day. Its symbols are the flag and the ballot and its liturgy includes the Star Spangled Banner and the Pledge of Allegiance. Its messianic vision suggests a humane republic, secure in peace and established in justice. America's civil religion provides for millions the redemptive vision so necessary to life: a sense of common purpose, a social and personal ethic, affirming rituals, and a promise of the future.

- Your civil religion seems like a convenient label, designed by people like yourself who are determined to see religion where it doesn't exist.

- Why wasn't the civil religion recognized earlier?

The social sciences have only recently developed the methodologies which allow us to properly study the phenomenon which we call 'religion.'

- If you're right about the civil religion, I know many of its most active members. They dislike institutional religion, believe in human decency, the public school system, affirmative action, arms control, a nuclear freeze, and world government. They're believers, but they'd argue that their ideas are purely rational and personal; but I've noticed that when I argue with them about some item on their agenda, they get quite hot under the collar.

The more hotly an idea is defended, the more certain you can be that it's rooted in that person's religious system. I sometimes describe religion as that cluster of ideas and hopes which we couldn't give up without cutting out part of our soul.

- Are you saying that everyone who doesn't belong to a church or synagogue belongs to the civil religion? I can't imagine American Nazis or the KKK signing on.

America's civil religion is a major denomination, but not the only non-classic one. Smaller religious groupings and cults loiter the religious landscape.

The American Nazis and the Klan are two of the many small cults who march under their own banner.

- If you're right about the civil religion, I'm a religious bigamist. In some areas,my feelings about Israel for one, I react as a Jew; in others, my feelings about affirmative action, I react as a civil religionist. Up till now I thought it was one religion to a customer.

Not necessarily. In Japan you'll often see a Buddhist shrine fronted by a Shinto gate, and in China you'll often find Taoist and Buddhist temples in the same shrine complex. We're not accustomed to such mixtures because the Western religions have tended to have imperial ambitions and to demand unconditional loyalty. But I'd argue that in almost every age there have been religious eclectics who were deeply affected by other cultures than their own. Pagan Greece deeply affected the thinking of many of the church fathers through their reading of Plato and Aristotle. Today, in an open society like ours with its public schools and national holidays, it seems to me inevitable that almost everyone will have been deeply affected by the nation's civil attitudes as well as his or her more traditional faith.

- I can't imagine an orthodox rabbi or a Roman Catholic priest accepting your thesis.

- Groups like the Amish have deliberately kept themselves apart.

The various communities exhibit different degrees of openness, but none are unaffected. The demands by various groups of Roman Catholic nuns that the church no longer treat them as second-class citizens grows out of the civil religion, not church teaching.

- I suspect a priest would argue that his church has always accommodated its forms to the needs of the times, but that the basic teachings have remain fixed and unchanging. An orthodox rabbi would make the same case about Judaism. They'd argue that forms may have changed, different melodies are used at services, but that the substance of the traditional religious message has remained inviolate.

They'd be wrong. Judaism and Christianity have repeatedly undergone transformations which were both substantive and substantial, and not purely cosmetic. For centuries both traditions insisted that that which has been is that which will be unless God wills otherwise. Today both affirm a more activist approach and preach the importance of each individual's efforts in securing social progress. If you had listened to medieval sermons, you'd have heard a lot of hell-fire and damnation talk. Today you're more likely to hear a mental health message.

- As a rabbi does it bother you that we're like magpies who build their nest with whatever we find lying about that seems to fit the bill? I'd think you'd want us to be Jewish to the core.

I never lose sleep over what is impossible. Jews and everyone else pick up attitudes from our environment. I think it's fortunate that America's civil religion was created by people whose attitudes have been nurtured by a number of healthy Biblical ideas, and that these became central to the secular religion. The Liberty Bell is inscribed: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land." The Federalist Papers cite God's rebuke of the Israelites when they cried out for a king as another proof of the legitimacy of constitutional democracy. Our Constitution enshrines Israel's protean vision of humanity, "Have we not all one Father; has not one God created us all?" and the concept of freedom under law. When I analyze many of my convictions I can't tell where the Jewish part of me leaves off and the American part takes over.

On the whole, I think that what you called religious bigamy has been a good thing for the country. It's helped us remain a relatively tolerant people. In 1980 when the president of the Southern Baptist Convention announced that God did not hear the prayers of Jews, his proprietary attitude toward God grated against the broader assumptions of the civil religion, and he was widely criticized. Had he spoken to a Christian polity which had not yet been deeply influenced by a civil religion which encourages respect for those of other opinions - all that Martin Luther King suggested when he said: "We must learn to live together as brothers

or we shall perish together as fools" - his words would not have been criticized. After all, classic Christianity built itself around Jesus's claim: "No one shall come to the Father except through Me."

- Let's go back to our original question. I know I'm an American. I think American. I live by American law. I live American. I know I'm a Jew, but I don't know how I'm a Jew. I don't think Jewish. I don't live by Jewish law. A few candles and an occasional holiday meal hardly add up to anything significant.

We're not always conscious that our motives are religiously based. Everyone here has been or is in college. It's Jewish to think college is a must.

- It's a must for everyone.

Not so. Some ethnic groups discourage college enrollment. The Menonites take their children out of school after the eighth grade. With us it was off the boat and into City College.

- My grandparents never went to college.

Many of Europe's colleges didn't allow Jews to enroll, but every Jewish boy went to heder and the culture emphasized the importance of education in every conceivable way. It was an honor to marry your daughter to the brightest student in the local yeshivah. It was perfectly legitimate for a man to spend his life as a matmid, a perpetual student. One of the hardest counseling tasks a rabbi can have is to convince parents that their teen-ager is not college material and ought to be encouraged to learn a trade.

- You're talking about a cultural trait.

In the old world culture and religion were inseparable. Since the second century Judaism has required that parents educate their sons. Talmud Torah, Torah study, was a virtue which could not be too highly praised. I'll give you another example: intellectual independence, stiff-neckedness. We're not a submissive lot. We've never been a people who meekly accepted authority. Abraham argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah and Job had a few things to say to God about His fairness doctrine. Jewish practice encouraged irdependert judgement. We've never

kissed the ring of ecclesiastical superiors. We don't automatically defer to statutory authority. I'm not surprised that the Jewish students in my seminars love to argue or that Israel's Kenesset is better known for tumult and noisy arguments than for decorum. We've always been a noisy, cantankerous lot.

- Noisiness has nothing to do with religion.

It's a by-product of a particular religious outlook.

- I'm still troubled by the broad definition you give to religion. I haven't got a dictionary in hand, but I'm sure Webster defines religion as faith in God or gods.

I once treated the various ways dictionaries defined religion and I found that they changed with the times. The first dictionaries reflected the parochial horizons of medieval Christendom, and defined religion as faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. After the age of exploration when Europe began to recognize that the rest of the world existed and was civilized, dictionary definitions were enlarged to include Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Chinese traditions. Since these religions all had shrines, scriptures and sacred symbols, religions were defined as institutions which possessed these features. More recently, dictionary editors have begun to reflect the approach I've been taking which focuses on the function of religion rather than its forms. Today you'll find religion defined as "a way of life in accord with authorized teachings" or "faith that the truth is known and the institutions which support that faith."

- The belief in God definition remains the first one.

Not always, and you must remember that dictionaries list common usage as well as correct usage. I'll make my point again. The modern study of religion began when scholars recognized that rituals, and even catechisms, are secondary manifestations and began to focus their interest on function rather than form. The heart of any religious enterprise lies in the redemptive ideas and promises which it expresses and its function is to encourage the community to accept these ideas and make them effective in their lives. Like it or not, idol worship and Marxist

ideology are religious phenomena, and unless the Moral Majority manages to censor Mr. Webster the next generation of dictionaries will reflect this understanding even more strongly.

- I'm still here and I'm still an atheist and an outsider.

You're here, a Jew among Jews.

- That's not what I meant.

But it's part of what I mean. Judaism is a religious civilization, not simply a set of doctrines or practices, and being Jewish isn't limited to those who can say 'Amen' after every paragraph in the prayer book.

At this point a loudspeaker crackled with the announcement of a volley ball game. I got in a last word, a favorite line from George Santayana's Reason In Religion: "Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncracy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life."

- I can't see where Judaism's and Christianity's messages are significantly different. Inside and out, my Christian friends and I are pretty much the same.

I remember your friends, the Jacksons. Go play ball. We'll come back to this point. We've got plenty of time. I was invited to referee their game. I felt we were off to a good start.

Chapter 2

WHAT I BELIEVE - WHAT JUDAISM BELIEVES

They were eager to talk and the conversation picked up as if there had not been a break.

- Everyone has a right to believe whatever they wan, but no one should impose beliefs.

- I'm not going to give in to your arguments. My religion is a private matter. I make up my own mind. No one tells me what to believe.

They already have. You didn't start your decision-making process with an empty mind. By the time we begin to think about religion the media, what you'd read, the conventional wisdom, your friends, and your home have left their mark on your attitudes.

- I've friends who were never sent to religious school. They didn't even celebrate Seder. Their parents told them they wanted them, when they grew up, to make up their minds. They didn't want to impose their beliefs. They were raised without any religious imprint.

Your friends may have grown up without a Jewish imprint, but they didn't escape some religious conditioning. Remember the civil religion. I'm sure they celebrated Thanksgiving and Labor Day, took civics in Junior High School, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. I'm also sure they were deeply affected by their parents' fierce faith in the autonomy of the individual.

- I like the idea of parents who try not to manipulate their children.

Manipulation is a loaded word. I'd never force a child to agree with me; but I never hid my convictions from our children and I certainly never considered their Hebrew lessons as a form of brainwashing. They were learning a useful skill, the language of Jewish life, and, at the same time, learning something about me and the values and interests which are important to me.

A child needs direction and standards to measure himself against. Children who are told, 'I can't tell you what to do,' often grow up to be weaker than those

whose parents had definite ideas. Just as a knife is sharpened by filing it against a hard stone, so convictions are strengthened when we test them against strong parental and societal beliefs. A 'keep Judaism away from Johnny' policy guarantees ignorance, not independence.

- I'm one of those people whose parents kept everything Jewish from them. They kept telling me how important it was that I be free to make up my own mind. They meant well, but I've paid a price. I was never sure who I was. I desperately wanted roots. I didn't know where or how to begin thinking about myself.

- I grew up in a 'do as I do' home and I felt that I wanted my children to have more freedom. But when it came time to enroll our daughter in school, we also sent hehr to Religious School. We decided we didn't want her to grow like a weed, unattended, wild. I'd seen too many weed children, tall and gangly kids who ought to have the world by the tail, but who can't put it together because they lack a sense of their worth. Someone described a weed as a flower whose virtue has not yet been discovered and we didn't want our children not to realize their potential. It just seems better to have her spend Saturday morning in Sabbath School than watching cartoon carnivals.

- Sabbath School wasn't much. We made clay candlesticks and learned to read the aleph-bet. About all I learned was that religion didn't deal with anything significant.

- The best course I took before going to college was my Confirmation class. The rabbi made us think.

- I used to come home each week and tell my parents it's all a waste. Every year we'd go over the same holidays prayers and sing the same songs.

Religious schools struggle with an almost impossible task. They are given two or three hours a week, perhaps thirty weeks a year, to explain the forms of Jewish life, to teach the facts of Jewish history, to prepare the student in Hebrew and to discuss the tradition's ethical and theological concerns; and they generally

are expected to accomplish this without assigning homework or serious reading. If I had spent the hours and mastered Hebrew, I'd be fluent in a foreign language; but I wouldn't necessarily be a better person or a better Jew. An Arab urchin in Nazareth speaks Hebrew.

- You'd understand the prayers.

- I don't believe God cares what language we use.

- The Talmd makes the same point. Any language can be used for prayer.

- So why Hebrew?

Jews have used Hebrew for their wisdom and song since Bible days. Hebrew calls up a rich past in a way none of our everyday language can.

- My school was big on doing: we visited hospitals and sang for the patients, wrote to Israeli pen pals and Soviet prisoners of conscience and composed our own services. Every other year the youth group took a trip to Israel.

The first statement any of you made was: 'My home was exactly like the Jackson's.' By providing opportunities to engage in Jewish experiences the schools are trying to make up for the blandness of many homes. It's called experiential education.

- I can see the logic of such a curriculum, but it seems manipulative. You're trying to shape people in an area where I believe they ought to be let alone. Religion is, or should be, a purely private matter.

Not so. Religion always involves community. A religion draws together and celebrates a group's values and vision. Faith is private. My faith represents my private understanding of Judaism. My religion informs my faith. I've used many of its ideas, but I've put them together in my own way.

- I don't want to be a magpie. I don't want to build a nest out of leavings. I want to be an eagle. I want to soar free, be on my own.

Before an eagle can fly he spends weeks as a fledgling being cared for in the eyrie. Judaism is the nest where I was nurtured until my imagination and learning had developed to the point where I could fly on my own.

- I've had a checkered religious career: T.M., an Indian guru, Zen, even a brief stay in a religious commune. I'm into faith. My parents maintained a Jewish nest, but I don't think that experience had anything to do with my own search. I decided where to look and when to leave. I made some totally unJewish decisions. I'm forming my own faith.

Apparently out of the bric-a-brac of various religious cults. I'm not a determinist. My point is that we don't spin our faith out of nothing. We use the yarn that is available to us. A good bit of conditioning always precedes conscious commitment.

- I've always assumed that religious commitment grew out of a special experience of God: Moses at the Burning Bush, Isaiah suddenly seized by the word of God. If I understand what you've been saying about the need to believe, you're saying that being religious is largely a matter of being alive and part of community.

- Some of us are more than others.

Most of us grow into our faith without any real trauma. Others, the more emotionally intense, may have what William James called a conversion experience.

- How was it with you?

I was in college toward the end of the second World War. My tutor was an Anglophile who felt that the English government had good reason to prevent Jews fleeing Nazi Europe from entering Palestine. The Zionists, he felt, were being unreasonable. The British Fleet needed Arab oil and, therefore, England needed Arab support. As we talked I realized that for me this wasn't just another political discussion. The issue didn't have two sides to it. I became quite determined and was reproved for incivility.

- I wouldn't call that a religious experience.

The mystic vision, communion with God, may be the archtypical religious experience, but it isn't the only kind; indeed, it's rather rare. Experience comes when we share a true spiritual experience, being part of a group who are wholly

caught up in their prayers or who feel drawn to the urgent human needs of a religious community toward which we feel some degree of loyalty.

I learned something about myself I hadn't known before.

In everyone's life there are times when something within us reaches out to something we apprehend but do not fully comprehend, and we acknowledge commitments that we have not till then consciously recognized.

Seder fell a few weeks after our argument and that night the familiar words, "next year in Jerusalem," caught in my throat. I began to make plans to go to work after graduation for an agency securing arms the yishuv would need to defend itself.

- I'm still troubled when I hear you describe such an experience as religious.

I was compelled to act by a strong emotional tide. It was one of those rare times when a people's life hung in the balance. Since I had that kind of binding experience I'm all the more certain that religious experience can emerge from participation in the religious community as well as one's private search for God. On May fifteenth, the day Israel proclaimed her independence, I happened to be in Times Square, and as that news flashed on the electronic tape high overhead my eyes clouded up, powerful feelings swept over me, and the words a lonely Jacob spoke when he unexpectedly sensed God's protective presence came to mind: "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not." In everyone's life there are times when something within us reaches out to do something we apprehend but do not fully comprehend and we acknowledge commitments that we have not till then consciously recognized.

- Those were intense years. I can imagine how you felt, but I was born three years after Israel became a state, and I grew up in the calm world of suburban America. Binding experiences don't take place in cocoons.

- So leave the cocoon. I got hooked at The Wall. When I got there late one afternoon there was just enough sun left to bring out the golden glow in the stones. A few old Jews and soldiers were praying. I found myself wiping tears from my

eyes. I felt myself part of Jewish history in a way I never had before.

We read a list of names of Soviet Jewish refuseniks at our Confirmation service and I choked up. I felt something.

And?

- Did you get active in your Temple youth group? Did you begin going to services?

- What's your point?

Such a low-keyed emotional tug is little more than a momentary flutter which I wouldn't, really, call a religious experience. After a real religious experience a whole new set of loyalties have a claim on you.

- If caring about your religion requires a religious high, why are we talking about identity? Why have religious schools? You can't be talked into a profound experience. It just happens. Religious experiences don't hit like a bolt out of the blue and they don't occur in a vacuum. Many non-Jews saw the corpses and ovens and were sickened by them, many certainly felt tha evil of Naziism; but they didn't couldn't, feel the responsibility of Jewish loyalty. Only a Jew could feel that.

- Come back to me and my undramatic upbringing. Religious School was a bore. If you're talking about excitement, forget it. The only time I was ever touched as a Jew was when I coached a Russian refugee in English.

You never know when and how you'll be grabbed; but when you are, you'll discover that your conditioning has set the parameters of your reactions. Lighting Chanukah lights and Sabbath candles, singing Hatikvah and Jerusalem the Golden, attending worship, browsing around in our literature, and working in the Jewish community may not at first get to you, but they'll prepare you for what can be a most satisfying life even when you're not wholly with it, try. Don't sit in services daring the music and words to get through to you; involve yourself in the moment, open yourself up. That service may be your moment.

- I went a few times. Nothing happened.

Try again. Religious feeling is like love. Sometimes love surprises us and

sometimes it takes a lot of being together before we realize that we're more than friends.

- I know what you mean. I told you my dad was active in our Temple. He made me so when I was a kid and the services bored me. Then one day, to my surprise, I began to sing along. It was a nice feeling.

- You know, this is the first time I've ever heard Jews talk about their private religious feelings. I had a roommate in graduate school who never stopped talking about the time he accepted Christ and about the changes faith had brought about. Christians seem to do a lot of talking about faith beliefs. Jews don't, at least not the Jews I know.

We're conditioned differently. Christianity emphasizes the transforming power of faith. They believe that the Christian faith is in and of itself redemptive and they prove this by having people witness publically to the benefits that faith brought to their lives. Judaism values faith. Faith fuels the will, but we have never assumed that faith alone transforms a life.

- Go on.

Our religious life is shaped around a specific set of commandments, presumedly given by God, which set out the right way. With us faith doesn't work in mysterious ways but by providing us the motivation to obey the Commandments and to develop heightened moral sensitivity. Faith and good works were not treated as seperable items. You were to do the right in good spirit and because you loved God. What I'm saying is that faith was not as a separate metaphysical entity to be developed in its own right.

The Jewish way was a demanding one and among the early Christians there were those like Paul who felt that the Commandments asked too much of them. Paul taught that if you have faith your life is transformed and you don't need the conditioning of a structure of specific laws. Faith is the keystone. Church life was shaped to encourage worshippers to believe in the miraculous powers of faith.

- My roommate used to tell me that faith works miracles, how this one was

healed and that one was able to get off alcohol.

Faith sometimes works miracles and sometimes the courts have to take away a child from parents who are withholding permission for an urgent operation because they believe that all healing comes from God. The Talmud instructs Jews "not to depend on miracles." "Don't put yourself unnecessarily in a dangerous situation in the belief that a miracle will occur."

Faith sometimes unleashes a rush of energy which helps us over a difficult stretch, but it's no cure-all. With us it's faith and self-discipline. Faith may lead an alcoholic to go through the pain of detoxification. If it works, faith works, but once he's clean he has to discipline himself never to take another drink. We need faith, self-discipline and a supportive community, and that's what Judaism has always tried to provide.

- You've been saying, in effect, that religious interest begins in the heart, not the head. I think you're right and I think we miss the boat when we don't ask people, as many Christian groups do, to make a public witness. My rabbi is always talking theoretically. He's never gotten to me. A few personal expression of belief would have been far more compelling.

Personal experience cut loose from any mooring in a defining tradition may be compelling; but we have to ask: what do they compel us to do? We give leadership to the learned, not to the possessed because no one knows where such Pied Pipers want to lead us. For us it's a matter of balance: schooling, the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people, rather than the testimony of one.

- I still think we're too intellectual. In my family, a family of synagogue goers, everyone talked about Israel and anti-semitism, and about the synagogue, but no one ever talked, at least not willingly, about their own beliefs.

- I agree. In Sabbath School we talked about what Judaism believed, but not about what our teachers actually believed.

- I like the Quaker service where people are free to say whatever is on their minds o nothing at all. It's a genuine moment.

Intensity by itself is not a virtue. There are all kinds of faith and a religious high can easily lead us in the wrong direction. Millions were caught up in the Nuremberg Rallies and in the frenzy of Mao's Permanent Revolution. I've attended evangelical services full of clapping and singing, full of faith, and of crude patriotism and cruder racism. The moment was special; emotions flowed; the participants felt confirmed and consecrated; but the loyalties the moment encouraged were dangerous and dysfunctional. Faith begins in the heart, but must never be left to the heart alone.

- I still like the idea of a say what's in your heart service. I'm a person, not a parrot. The prayer book was written by somebody else. Happenings are genuine.

Happenings can be genuine and trivial, an exchange of sentimentality and conventional ideas. The synagogue service was shaped around carefully chosen texts and the Torah; we wanted to make sure our worship raised up ideas worth thinking about.

- The texts aren't mine.

Worship is not limited to the texts. The texts present the basic Jewish message. They are meant as springboards to reflection, not as a loyalty oath. The service is full of music, song and silence to give you plenty of time to develop your own thoughts.

- What if I disagree with what's said?

Even so, the idea is usually worth thinking about.

- Our rabbi constantly breaks into the service to give us background on a particular prayer. Sometimes I'm interested, but generally I find he gets in the way.

A service should flow and be full of what the Bible calls "the beauty of holiness." Giving directions often makes it difficult for the sacred to get through.

- Getting through?

A German scholar, Rudolph Ottc, coined a term, numinous, to describe the emotional impact of a moment when a group is caught up in the mysterious reality beyond the work-a-day world, in a reality beyond any ordinary experience. Jews call the numinous Kedusha, holiness. Otto, a non-Jew, observed the numinous on a number of occasions, including a Yom Kippur service in a small North African synagogue. He described the scene. The worshippers were in white. The chant was minor-keyed and repetitive. The congregation moved with a back and forth sway which drew the worshippers out of themselves. They were in a world beyond ordinary cares and concerns.

- Otto wouldn't find the numinous in my shul. There's a permanent undercurrent of talk and much looking around.

- We don't chit-chat so much, but nothing much happens. I will say that the youth group does have a lively service.

- That's what I've been saying: you can't have a prayer book and spontaneity. Without spontaneity you're a spectator, not a participant.

A happening can be full of feeling and, because it has no focus to the participant, without lasting benefit. Worship, what you normally find in the synagogue, presents the sacred possibilities of life as defined and affirmed by our tradition. Worship is not designed as a happening but as an art form. Responsiveness, and not spontaneity, is the key to the success of a service.

- Synagogue worship seems to me a well-designed indoctrination technique whose basic rationale is that if people repeat the creed often enough they'll end up as believers.

- Worship does try to keep a community from unravelling by having them come together and confirming its special message, but that's not the whole of it.

Worship has both a public and a private side: words and silence. I'm part of a congregation, but also alone with my thoughts and, more often than not, I'm thinking about how I fit into God's universe rather than about the theology of a particular prayer. Besides, I find it a satisfying experience to be reminded of my roots. It's much like coming home to visit parents, for a moment you're enclosed again in a protective love.

- I've no patience with any kind of indoctrination. We're meant to be free, but religion won't let us be. Parochial schools beat the faith into kids' heads; pulpits preach; services put words in our mouths; and synods organize political campaigns to outlaw abortion or force television stations to show "acceptable" material.

As I said earlier, all institutions are rife with contradictions, and some more than others; but you're telling only one half of the story. Schools educate and indoctrinate. Many pulpits try to encourage critical thinking about the major moral issues of the day. The service reminds us that we must "do justly, love mercy and walk humbly." The synagogue is not always a saintly, or even inspiring, place; yet, it has its place.

- I don't expect any institution to be pristine, but let it at least be relevant. The people in my parents' congregation are always squabbling over nothing. Our city's full of real problems - race, unemployment, poverty - and they hold endless meetings on whether to redecorate the Social Hall.

A synagogue is a community of neighbors who share a religious tradition, not a fellowship of the virtuous. The synagogue's goal is holiness, but life is with people and few, if any, of us are saints. In any case, the prayer book and the school program raise up the serious issues. A synagogue can't escape those serious ideas which the tradition has built in.

- Irrelevance doesn't bother me as much as hypocrisy. I'm put off by congregations which emblazon the Ten Commandments over their ark and call to the pulpit hard-eyed men whose only virtue is their wealth or power.

You'll hear no argument from me. I often am reminded of the Yiddish saying that every rich man is wise, competent, has a beautiful singing voice.

- I was raised to treat religion and religious leaders with respect. As a child I often confused our rabbi with God. Now I find that some of his ideas are trivial and that he's no better than anyone else.

Religious leaders are human beings. Some are intelligent. Some are simply passionate. Some enjoy power and the trappings of office. Some are truly humble. Almost all try to serve God but none is Godlike. Actually, in Judaism there's no such office as religious leader. A rabbi is principally a teacher of Judaism, not an ecclesiastic. Judaism does not encourage automatic deference. Jews are never asked to kneel before their rabbi.

- I once went to a cathedral service where the bishop sat on a throne looking like Charlemagne. Royal trappings fit poorly on those who call themselves God's servants.

When I read services I do so in an ordinary suit. I don't want anyone to think of me as apart or different.

- I can't argue with you when you're in the pulpit.

Many do, later. I don't claim to preach an Infallible Word. I say what I think, why I think as I do, and why I believe my ideas express the thrust of our tradition. If I'm persuasive, well and good; if not, I'll be tuned out, even if I'm right.

After service we often meet to discuss the sermon and our rabbi gives everyone a chance to talk. He doesn't interrupt. He's a sensitive man, but he also doesn't change his mind.

We're back to the problem of open-mindedness. Religious questions are not theoretical questions asked calmly and answered dispassionately, but urgent questions which we answer with our lives. Faith implies commitment. Once we have answers that satisfy us we don't readily let go of them. I wouldn't have become a rabbi if I hadn't been convinced of the importance of our special message.

- My problem is not the rabbi but the synagogue. I don't understand why, given its purpose, it's such an uninspired entity. At home we've had a succession of rabbis and even the good ones haven't been able to focus people's interest of human need and social action rather than bazaars and bingo.

I don't know your community, but I do know that the synagogue is trapped by the Jewish tradition. No synagogue can eliminate regular services or take Amos out of the Bible.

- Thursday nights bingo is crowded. Friday night there are a lot of empty seats.

And a minyan.

- The message isn't getting through.

How can you be so sure? I'm sure there are those like you who use the synagogue for its real purposes.

- I think of the synagogue as a set-apart place, a sanctuary. I don't think of it as a place which requires anything of me.

The Biblical Temple in Jerusalem was a sanctuary built around a Holy of Holies which only the High Priest could enter. Only a priest of the family of Aaron could officiate at the altar. The synagogue, on the other hand, is an open place, a people's place, where holiday and Sabbath prayers are sung, the Torah read and discussed, and community business debated. Anyone who is able can conduct the service or read from the Torah. The synagogue reflects Judaism's teaching that every man, every place, and every useful activity is precious to God. It doesn't have to be built a certain way. It's a place where every individual counts. Nine rabbis do not make a minyan. Ten laborers do.

- I hear you, but at home the rabbi conducts the service and for all we do he might as well be a priest.

That's not at all what I've seen. Much of the year we read large parts of the service and during the summer members do it all. Occasionally, one of us preaches. Our rabbi wants us to do more. He says that his is the only profession

which encourages competition.

- I've always wondered why we pray for The Temple to be rebuilt. Personally, I hope it never happens. I've watched animals being sacrificed in the Indian villages of Latin America and there was nothing elevating in such rites and, like you, I don't want my religion done for me by priests.

I take that prayer as nothing more than a dramatic expression of the age-old Jewish hope that we want to be a free people in our own land and be able to worship there as we see fit.

- That's not what it says.

This prayer was written after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Jews looked on the destruction of the Temple as the beginning of exile, and it was only natural that they should associate its rebuilding with the end of exile. But what is important is that they didn't spend too much time lamenting what they no longer had, but quickly reorganized religious life by attaching added sanctity to the informal meetings which ahd long since developed wherever Jews lived. What they did was to find the social aura of holiness which existed within the centers.

- When you talk about attaching an aura of holiness to an institution, I hear intonations of magic.

Not magic but meaning. It was essential that the synagogue be endowed with some of the Temple's emotion. For worship to work people must be prepared to find n the synagogue that emotional electricity which turns a perfunctory occasion into a powerful and reassuring rite.

- You're talking magic. A building is a building and nothing more.

Do you know the term mana? Anthropologists use it to describe the sense groups develop that some special power is concentrated in a place or object. Obviously, awareness of that power is in the eyes of the beholder, not in the object or place. The expectation of a powerful moment increases the likelihood that something significant will happen. Jews had stood in awe of The Temple. The synagogue never was treated in the same way, but because it was associated with the

reading of Torah, God's word, it became in the life of our people a mikdash me'at, a toned-down sanctuary.

- I've always thought of the synagogue as a community center which has class-rooms and meeting rooms where special events, forums and services can be held. We hold public lectures and weddings in the same auditorium we hold services. The Ark can be rolled off.

The synagogue was an open institution, but not a totally informal one. Quite early in its development the Ark which contained the Torah scrolls was curtained off the way the Holy of Holies in The Temple had been. Worshippers bowed when they crossed in front of the Ark. The practice developed that when the Torah was paraded worshippers touched it with their prayer shawls and then kissed the garment. The Torah is the logos of the synagogue's mana, but it's a rather low-keyed phenomenon. Anyone who is competent can read. Many are called up to bless the reading.

The camp cook chose this moment to bring in a tea cart. When everyone had been served the conversation resumed on a slightly different tack.

- I've been debating whether or not to join a congregation. I want to set down some roots. I like the holidays. I'm proud of being Jewish, I care about Israel, but I don't accept some of the doctrines the synagogue stands for.

For instance.

- I don't believe God answers prayer or that there's life after death. I certainly don't believe that God actually gave the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai or even that he spoke to Moses.

No synagogue I know requires potential members to sign articles of faith before they are allowed to join. Even when I was ordained I wasn't required to affirm a creed or pledge submission to a superior's authority.

- I'm surprised. I knew that rabbis didn't prostrate themselves before some chief rabbi like newly ordained priests before a bishop, but I always thought there must be some kird of loyalty oath.

Our teacher told us simply: 'We've taught you what we can. Continue studying. Try to teach effectively to your congregation and support the survival of the Jewish people in every way you can.

- Interesting, but you really haven't addressed my question. You wouldn't have spent years in the seminary if you didn't find Jewish ideas sympathetic. I don't. Judaism's over there and I'm here. How can I affirm what I don't accept?

You can't. You needn't.

- You can't be saying that Judaism is like silly putty that I can shape into anything I want to make of it.

A synagogue is a community of Jews bound together by respect for Torah, familiarity with the patterns of Jewish culture, and concern for the survival of the Jewish people. A synagogue is not a congregation of "true believers." We don't bar the door to anyone can't say Amen to every idea in the Torah or the prayer book.

- I can believe anything I want.

Who can stop you? But recognize that the synagogue will continue to promote its special message.

- That's coercion.

Not coercion, consciousness-raising. When a religious group uses the power of the state to force attendance and submission, that's coercion; but when, as in the case of the American synagogue, attendance is voluntary and the only power the institution possesses is the power of suggestion and example, then we're talking not of coercion but of gentle and legitimate encouragement.

- You're being inconsistent. Now you're telling me that I can't expect my synagogue to tailor its teachings to my beliefs. Earlier you described Judaism as an evolving tradition which has changed to fit the needs of changing time.

Consistency is not necessarily the mark of truth. Life is full of contradiction.

- That's no answer.

Judaism evolves, but does so slowly by a process of serious reflection and community consensus. Your views and needs are only one of the many thousands. Over the years you may change your views. The synagogue must be more consistent and infinitely more patient in separating intellectual fad from philosophic truth; conventional wisdom but wisdom which will stand up to the test of time.

Haven't you overstated the synagogue's openness? The synagogue may not ask me to take a loyalty oath, but rabbis expect their communities to follow certain rules.

Convictions have practical consequences. Traditions have forms.

And the religious like to excommunicate those who don't conform. During the Middle Ages each Jewish community was responsible for the maintenance of law and order among its members and almost the only effective means of control at its disposal was the threat of ostracism. It's of interest. The first text by a modern Jewish thinker who wrestled seriously with the implications of emancipation, Moses Mendelsohn's Jerusalem, advocated the banning of the ban. Coercion, he argued, had no place in a situation where the religious bodies were no longer charged with maintaining law and order.

- The chief rabbis of Israel obviously don't agree with Mendelsohn. They use their political clout freely to coerce everyone to accept their authority.

- Israel's a special case. The state, after all, defines itself as a Jewish State and for many the halachic norms define Judaism. I happen not to agree. My problem is not that rabbinic regulations necessarily are unacceptable in general, rabbinic law is both functional and sensible, but that the present arrangement is coercive and was imposed after a crude political bargain. Incidentally, I know orthodox rabbis who deplore the present political arrangement in Israel almost as much as I do. They believe, as I do, that in the modern world coercion ends up by being counterproductive and that the appeal of their position is diminished, not enhanced, by the current arrangement.

- Israel's rabbis wouldn't have demanded these powers in the first place if traditional Judaism didn't assume that this was the right way to organize Jewish life. I'm no expert, but it seems to me that Jewish political philosophy is not democratic since the tradition assumes that certain rules are God-given instructions and not subject to popular referendum. Those who believe literally in Sinai must feel that no other law but God's law, the Torah, would be appropriate for a Jewish state.

- Khomeini's Iran is based on similar logic.

So were all European states until the French Revolution. So are all Arab states today. The separation of church and state is a modern concept which requires a difficult revision of outlook for those who believe that God's rules cannot be set aside just because a majority decide that divorce should be allowed or abortions permitted. Actually, what this recasting of attitude requires is a determined humility. A true believer can go through religious divorce procedures as well as those of the state. An open society is open to those of firm convictions. What an open society cannot tolerate is their determination that everyone must do it their way.

- As a rabbi how do you answer the other side of that argumeznt, that if Judaism can be changed by the popular will it can no longer claim to be a sacred tradition?

Holiness lies in a tradition's ability to enhance life rather than in a tradition's antiquity. Delphi was once a holy shrine. It's now a tourist site. The world it spoke to is dead and its oracles have long since lost their relevance. Furthermore, Judaism isn't arbitrarily changed by the popular will. What happens is that we interpret Torah with fresh eyes. The old is always there.

- You only get this problem because Judaism intrudes into practical affairs where it doesn't belong.

I'll say it again. It can't be otherwise. Religion's not a romantic sentiment but a special message about the meaning of our life and all life. Put

another way, we who serve God whom we affirm to be just and merciful must not only worship Him in the synagogue but work to create a just and merciful society. To this end the Torah not only promulgates righteousness in general terms - we are to speak the truth, avoid malicious gossip, not bear a grudge, be loyal to our family responsibilities, respect the sanctity of marriage, and honor our parents - but properly sets out a whole series of specific rules through whic holiness, as the Israelites understood the term, would become part of the social order: tithing one's field, freeing the slave on the sabbatical year, paying a laborer immediately all that he has been promised, due process, and a carefully organized judicial system.

- You're talking about law, not religion.

Judaism is not a private piety of withdrawal but an affirmation of righteous living and the righteous community and necessarily is deeply concerned that ways be found to structure its values into our public and private lives. In the older self-governing communities, this necessarily meant that Judaism made itself effective through structure - law. We live under different rules and so many parts of the old law are no longer applicable. The secular courts adjudicate criminal and contract issues, so we look for the principles which informed the halacha in these areas and try to see to it, when the halacha reflects some significant sensitivity, that the state acts in the same spirit.

- I've never liked religion getting into politics. I don't like the image of rabbis striking deals in smoke-filled rooms and in most of the areas of our political lives. The ethical simplicities of the pulpit are too superficial to be useful.

I wouldn't want my synagogue to align itself with the personal ambitions of any politician or political party, but when it comes to social policy and the questions which invclve the future of life on this earth, I can't imagine Judaism remaining silent and as a rabbi I can't imagine myself remaining uninvolved.

- Play that idea out for a moment. You want to be in politics in order to sponsor Judaism's social concerns. If you become active in politics every other religious group has the right to do the same, and many will push for programs you don't approve of: creationism, an anti-abortion amendment, and federal aid to parochial schools. Most of the single issue crusades of our day have begun with some religious body. Wouldn't it be better for all the groups to stay out of politics?

Everything we do creates possibilities and problems. Moreover, Judaism encourages us to be involved.

Our special message specifically links piety and public policy. God did not allow Moses to enjoy a quiet domesticity with his wife and sons in Midian. He was told to go back to Egypt to carry out God's will. The prophets insisted that God demanded acts of justice rather than sacrifices. "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts. . .I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly." Rabbis were encouraged to be active in their communities even in business - rather than to withdraw into a life of secluded piety. The mandate was clear: "Separate not yourself from the community."

Some years ago I visited an old synagogue in Lisbon. The wall facing the entrance door contained perhaps a dozen slots, each large enough to receive folding money. A brass plate above each slot bore the name of a service organization: Hachnasat Kallah, society for providing to brides; Bikkur Holim, society for the care of the sick; Hevrah Kaddisha, burial society. That synagogue raised and dispersed money for the welfare needs of the community.

- I'm not impressed by charity. It's simply an easy way for the wealthy to feel virtuous and to gain respectability.

Those who put money into these boxes were paying communal dues, not giving charity. Judaism teaches that today's giver might well be tomorrow's recipient and that financial success is as much a result of mazzal, good fortune, as

hard work. I don't know a single line in our literature which tells either the rich man or the poor man that he deserves his lot. Hebrew has no term for charity.

- Be that as it may, a recent poll indicated that most Americans would prefer it if their ministers stayed out of politics.

People call a sermon political when they disagree with the preacher. If they agree he's not talking politics but explaining God's word and doing good. The same people who blast the Moral Majority for injecting religion into politics applaud the Council of Catholic Bishops for approving a Nuclear Freeze.

- My college roommate was a devout church-goer who always insisted that politics was not the church's business. She was full of quotes: "Render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's and to God those things which belong to God" and "My Kingdom is not of this world." The church, she said, was in the salvation business, not in the bureaucracy business.

Most American churches took this hands-off view as long as the school day began with prayer, the school teacher was a church member, and history assignments confirmed what was taught in Sunday School. They began to get involved when Sunday Blue Laws began to be abrogated and the public schools could no longer be counted on to reinforce church values. During the 1980 presidential campaign many one-time 'stay out of politics' church folk coalesced into The Moral Majority whose political agenda is to require America's institutions to again reflect and support church interests.

- You're being quite a cynic. You're suggesting that religious groups stay in or out of politics on the basis of practical benefit rather than principle.

Churches and synagogues are human institutions. During the thirties the Vatican held its tongue on the evils of Fascism.

- And during the fifties and sixties many churches took leading positions in civil rights and the peace movements.

There is always a principle. The question is which principle and how is it defined.

- Would you argue that the opposition of most Jewish groups to such programs as public support of parochial education reflects the benefit Jews have gained from the high wall of separation.

And the sense of belonging Jews gained from the public school experience. In any case, I'm not surprised that those responsible for the budgets of Jewish day schools have, by and large, ceased to be hardliners on the issue. There's some self-interest in all that we do.

- Surely, you don't discount altruism?

- I prize generosity of spirit and principled convictions. I believe that these are the virtues which truly enhance life, but I also believe that we can never completely act out of disinterest. Liberality cannot be fully separated from the vanity of giving. The test is to separate it as far as possible.

- Then there are no saints?

None, but, thank God, there are a lot of great-hearted and learned people. God created us as human beings, not angels, and the test is to become as human and sensitive as we can.

The mood was getting a bit sermonic and we decided to break for dinner.

Chapter 3

Must I Remain What I Am?

As I thought about our first day's conversation I felt that somewhere at the heart of it was an assumption - how widespread I couldn't tell yet - that a person can switch religions as easily as he might decide to move from one apartment to another or change his style of dress; so I began the next morning by commenting that some of them had talked as if they might take a good look at Judaism and decide whether to join or go elsewhere, and that once that decision was made - to be or not to be - that would be that.

- Isn't it?

It's not that simple. Ask any convert. Most testify to bouts of guilt, feelings of cultural awkwardness, and a nagging sense of being adrift. The imprint we received as children, the conditioning we receive from the prevailing culture, the manners of our class, and the habits and attitudes of our peers, are deeply etched and not easily erased.

- Didn't the Jesuits claim that if they could have a child during the first six years of life his soul would belong to them as long as he lived?

That claim may be apocryphal. It certainly overstates the case. So does the Biblical proverb, "Train up a child in the way he should go and he will follow you the rest of his life." But nobody should minimize the power of conditioning. Wholehearted converts to Judaism have told me, "I can't help it, I miss Christmas," or "I checked the wrong box at last fall's registration before I realized what I was doing" or "I feel more at home every year, but I've never stopped expecting the collection plate." Almost any change can be emotionally difficult. A young man who'd been raised in a traditional congregation and had joined his wife's synagogue told me: "I agree intellectually with the Reform position but I'll never get used to a woman rabbi." My college adviser, probably the most learned

Jewish philosopher of his day, Harry Austryn Wolfson, began to suffer stomach pains when as an undergraduate he registered in a non-kosher rooming house, and for all his brilliance years passed before he associated these aches with his break with childhood custom.

- I'm still convinced, as I told you yesterday, I could leave without any regrets and without ever looking back.

And I'll repeat what I said: 'don't be so sure.' Around every synagogue you'll find a cluster of spiritual returnees; there's even a familiar name for them, ba'alei teshuvah, usually middle-aged or older men and women who stayed away from Judaism for years but now feel a need to come in out of the cold.

Years ago I heard Margaret Mead describe how the idea of home tugs incessantly at the emigrant. The peasants who left the villages of Eastern and Southern Europe fled abject poverty. Many found a measure of prosperity in the coal mines of Pennsylvania or the steel mills of Ohio; but most never felt rooted in their new life, and many retired to the old country and died comfortably in familiar surroundings. Conditioning explains what is to me the bizarre behavior of some converts to Christianity who worship Jesus in Hebrew, call their church a synagogue and insist that they're still Jews. They've left but can't admit they've gone.

Most people remain suspicious of converts. It's not so much that they doubt the convert's sincerity but they wonder if the convert knows his heart as well as he knows his mind.

- Some of my Christian friends call anyone who comes out of a Jewish background a Jew. It doesn't matter if they have been life-long members of some church.

- The Soviet and Red Chinese press routinely label the children of once-privileged families "capitalist roaders."

- Most conversions are acts of convenience, not convictions. A Jew wants to move up in the corporate world. A non-Jewish fiancee wants to please her future

in-laws.

Some are. Some aren't. I convert about twenty people a year, and about half of those who study with me are not contemplating marriage. Some seek a faith which will inspire them in a way their family's religion did not. For some of these it's a highly charged and wrenching emotional experience born out of gnawing and growing doubts about what they had been taught. Others have lived among Jews long enough to have become more comfortable with us and our ways than with any other group.

- I know people who have gone the conversion route and feel completely at home and at ease.

At home and at ease, yes. Completely at home, I'm not sure.

I remember one young woman, liberal, well-read, sure that her nominal Christian upbringing would not stand in the way of a whole-hearted involvement in the Jewish life of her future husband and family. She had told me before her conversion: "I never went to Sunday School. I've always believed in God but never in the Christ myth. In many ways I've always been a Jew." Some years later she came and asked me to deconvert her. I told her that no such ceremony exists. Besides, it wouldn't be my place to organize one. But we kept talking, in part because she was so determined that I understand her feelings: "I don't want to become a Christian. I don't believe in the cross, but I find I can't give up Easter and Christmas and somehow I feel disloyal to my parents."

- I've a philosopher friend who's a confirmed atheist and a religion buff. He travels a great deal and makes it a point to attend services in Indian temples and Shinto shrines. He's proud of the fact he hasn't been inside a synagogue since his bar mitzvah, but I noticed that he took his sabbatical at the Hebrew University and he's always talking about the cultural scene in Israel.

Conditioning assumes that our homes had a Jewish imprint. Mine didn't. My parents were Jews but our home was a Jewish blank. The only thing Jewish about our lives was the fact that my mother served lox and bagels for Sunday brunch.

I could leave without ever looking back.

Perhaps you could. There are many degrees of conditioning and, obviously, the more conditioning the deeper the imprint. However, I doubt that delicatessan was the only Jewish element in your childhood. I know your parents. We've been in a number of political battles together. I know they're not synagogue people, but I also know their positions on welfare legislation and race and I'd argue that their strong convictions about injustice grew out of their Jewish upbringing.

- Many non-Jews share their convictions and many Jews don't seem to care.

- Since you know my folks you know they're people who are quite aware of what they do and why. They've never once suggested to me that their political activism had anything Jewish about it. They feel religion is medieval and the synagogue is irrelevant. I can't tell you how many times my father reminded me that prayer never fed an empty stomach.

European political reform draws its original inspiration from Amos and Isaiah. Judaism never allowed Jews to feel that this world was beyond redemption, so we should bear its trials and expect our reward in another life. Some day you might want to read Isaac Deutscher's autobiography, The Non-Jewish Jew. As a young man Deutscher renounced the synagogue and became a Communist. He never returned, but as he grew older he recognized how much his anger and philosophy into injustice grew out of the burning outrage of prophets, again, those who abuse the poor and the welfare system

- I don't see where you're going with your argument that Judaism should be important to us because we can't quite get rid of it. Deutscher may have remembered reading Amos in heder, but he certainly set his children to read Marx rather than the Five Books of Moses. What you're talking about is a lingering cultural residue, and nostalgia has a short half-life. If the heart has gone out of the enterprise, if no one still believes the special message, why keep at it?

You're here. The call of the cradle faith is a compelling, often an unyielding summons. I'm not now defining or defending Judaism. I'm simply commenting

on its impact.

- My parents are strange Jews. They belong to a synagogue. They give to the United Jewish Appeal. They talk about Israel, anti-semitism, Soviet Jewry. They know a good bit about Jewish history but their mutes when it comes to God or prayer.

They're not so strange. I can't tell you how often one of my Confirmation students, while questioning me on some religious matter, will add: 'I asked my parents and they told me to ask you.'

- You're the expert.

- They're afraid they won't be able to say it right.

- My father kept a prayer book on his bedside table, but he never talked about his beliefs. Once I asked him why and he put me off. I always held it against him that he shut me out, and I always wondered why.

- My parents were somewhat like that. I was car-pooled to religious school. If it was their turn to drive they never got out of the car unless I was in a play or receiving some award. After school they would ask whether I enjoyed the morning but not what I'd learned. I never understood why they sent me to Sabbath School.

- It's hard to talk about what you believe.

- Others do.

I'll give you my theory. The old synagogue took God and prayer for granted. When Jews broke out of the old environment, they tried to become modern in every way and since most of them came out of Eastern Europe where the modern alternative was socialism with its anti-religious bias, several generations of Jews tried to redefine Judaism as Jewishness - ethos and culture without theology.

- You're not making them seem as a particularly discriminating lot.

Christians had a few years from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century to adjust to new cultural attitudes. Many Jews had only six or eight weeks, the length of the trip from Poland to London or New York.

- So why did my parents insist I go to Religious School?

- My father told me: 'you'll always be known as a Jew, at least know what it's all about.'

Jews belong to a community of fate, only part of which is also a community of faith.

But why?

History, nostalgia, outside pressures.

- Anti-semitism.

Memories of colorful holidays and happy tables, an unarticulated feeling that Judaism was more down to earth, less mythic, than the others.

I've the feeling that the faith/fate balance has begun to tilt towards faith. There seem to be fewer drop-the-kids-off-and-go-on families now than when I was being car-pooled. I'm in temple more often than my parents ever were and in recent years I've noticed my parents, too, have become more observant. I think it's the times. We're terribly confused, more than a bit disenchanted, and in need of a regular dose of encouragement that our concerns are for the right thing.

- When I go to services I'm surrounded by empty pews.

I suspect you're both right. In the Jewish community the interested are more intensely involved and the disinterested are, if anything, less. Fewer Jews were raised in old-fashioned homes and more of us feel the need for spiritual roots.

- We keep talking about a Jewish community, but I don't see community; I see groups of Jews who have little in common: the affiliated and the unaffiliated; community activists and those who don't do anything; observant Reform and non-observant Orthodox; some who worship every day, some who worship twice a year, and some who don't come at all.

- Observant Orthodox and non-observant Reform.

- Those, too.

- What's your point?

- There's no center, we don't agree about enough to be considered a community. There's no special message, there's only a lot of conflicting messages out there.

There are federations. We shared many concnerns, Israel, Soviet Jewry, anti-semitism.

- You're talking about outside pressures. I guess what I'm saying is that I don't see why we should work at being Jews just because many in our world don't like Jewry.

- We must say something pretty important if the world needs to gang up on us.

Our message is simplicity itself. God is and God is one. God created life and put a spark of divinity in everyone. Any claim to special privilege is intolerable.

- So why do we argue so much?

We're a fiercely independent lot, always have been. Moses led twelve fractious, often rebellious, tribes. You know the old line, 'two Jews, three opinions" - yet, in times of crisis most of us pull together.

- I'd hate to think that we've no better reason to exist than to spite the anti-semites. I believe in the importance of continuing a family name if the name stands for something.

The Bible began with the creation story. It's a good earth we inherit. God wants us to be careful stewards and Judaism emphasizes the practical requirements of a wholesome community and a wholesome life rather than the performance of sacraments which will open Heaven's gate. The non-Jewish Jew feels pride in the prophets and their fierce defense of justice in all its forms. The synagogue Jew will talk of the mission of Israel and may actually quote Isaiah: "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness and taken hold of your hand, to set you as a covenant of the peoples, as a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring the prisoners out of confinement, and those who dwell in darkness out

of the dungeon."

- That's a special message but not a special message. Many Christians and humanists share these convictions. They're not just ours. Most religions counseled people to turn away from the world and the worldly. Some even told them that they'd not know any peace of mind until they gave up all public commitments, including family and marriage.

- That was long ago. There are no more monasteries.

There are still a few, but I'll agree that the Christian world has become more Jewish.

- Before you begin to define our reason for being, explain to me just who belongs to this Jewish community.

Any Jew.

Who's a Jew?

You become a Jew in the same way that anyone becomes an American citizen - by being born to parents who are citizens or through naturalization. According to rabbinic law a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother or one who converts, the convert is the full equal of one born a Jew. Ruth, a convert, was worthy of being the great-grandmother of King David and, by inference, a direct ancestor of the Messiah.

- I was asking a religious, not a legal, question.

In the ancient world religious identity was a legal fact as well as a profession of faith. You were a citizen of a religious community and governed by its law.

- Why was the mother the determining factor?

The Hebrews, like the other peoples of the ancient Middle East, practiced a modest polygamy, and in such societies rules based on maternal descent were generally the norm since they provided an effective way to settle questions of inheritance and precedence.

- Today it's one husband and one wife. The rationale for using the mother is

no longer valid.

Recently the Reform community acknowledged this when it decided to consider as a Jew any child of an intermarriage who had been raised as a Jew.

- You'd think religion should be a matter of private decision, either you affirm or you don't.

I must say I rather like the matter-of-factness of the old approach since, despite all our pretensions to being free spirits, we are in large measure what our family raises us to be, and parents play a major role in that conditioning process.

But the rule almost makes us into a racial group rather than a religion.

The rule stipulates conversion. The Jewish community is an open community.

- I was surprised when you talked of receiving twenty converts. I thought we didn't seek converts.

We don't maintain missions, but we are happy to accept converts. In the Greco-Roman world we were quite active in the missionary field until the emperors of Rome became Christians and ruled that only their church could receive converts. During the Middle Ages when Europe was ruled by Christian kings and church law, whole Jewish communities were sometimes put to the sword if a local Christian became an apostate. We were forced not to reach out and it took several generations of living in an open society. Therefore, we were again comfortable with this kind of outreach.

But we still don't have missionaries.

- Why not?

I suppose we're still somewhat inhibited by the fact that we are a minority. Then, too, Judaism has never taught that non-Jews will be barred from Heaven. We're not accustomed to the idea that a convert to Judaism saves his immortal soul.

- My mother's a convert. She once told me that when she told an aunt of her decision the aunt broke into tears because they wouldn't see each other in Heaven.

- I've always thought of the Jewish community as somewhat tribal.

- We claim to be a Chosen People.

The Chosen People, not the chosen race. The Bible is remarkable among classic literatures for the absence of any myth which claims that the community, or its leaders, descends from the gods. Abraham is described as a semi-nomad of no particular nobility. The Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt are called an asafsuf, an undistinguished lot, and they were joined by an erev rav, people of no particular lineage who, having thrown in their destiny with our Fathers, are never again spoken of as a distinguishable and separate group. The mair point is that anyone who's willing to follow the covenanted way can join with us.

- Still, Jews feel they are God's favorites.

All religions assert some special relationship to their god or patron. The chosen people idea seems to me little more than a reification of what the psychiatrist calls a healthy ego.

- Only Jews claim to be a chosen people.

Not so. Christianity makes precisely the same claim. In fact, they say that God removed the title from Israel and gave it to the Church.

- I don't like pretensions of any kind.

Pretensions such as you're talking about usually lead to demand for special privilege. God's choice of Israel brought special responsibilities rather than special favors.

- How did the chosen people idea come into being in the first place?

Quite naturally. Our ancestors were certain God had given them a special message, and they felt honored by the fact. They felt that their lives had a new focus and they spoke of this feeling as 'election.' The Torah has God say to Israel: "you have seen what I did in Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you here to me. If only you will now listen to Me and keep My covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become My special possession for the whole earth is Mine. You shall be My kingdom of priests, My holy nation."

- Many claim that we're racists because we speak of ourselves as a chosen people.

The rabbis said God first offered the Torah to Israel's various neighbors, but each in turn demurred. They didn't want to be held to such a strict account. Racial arrogance has nothing to do with it. God chose a motley of erstwhile slaves.

- The chosen people idea may have been a useful theme in the past. It's not now and ought to be dropped. In a world which believes in democracy and cultural pluralism, chosen people talk makes us seem a closed-in and clannish group.

I've no particular trouble with the term, but it says some nice things to me: 'Be grateful that you belong to a people who sense a special duty and feel compelled to do it.' I wouldn't want to be part of a people who had been satisfied with the conventional standards of their time and place. As God's chosen people, Jews couldn't - can't - let Him down. In any case, I won't allow anti-semites to dictate what I can believe or say.

- You're being uncharacteristically romantic.

- No, I'm simply reminding you that we tend to set our standards by what others expect of us. I did my best work in school for the teachers who expected the most of me. Jews felt God had said to them what my parents often said to me: "Don't settle for the average." Like a capable student whose ability has been recognized, more was demanded of the Jew. Judaism affirms the possibilities of the human spirit.

- You make Judaism sound like an early version of one of those pop culture, human potential seminars.

I don't mean to. Judaism's message is not, 'here's the guaranteed way to be successful' but, 'here are God's Instructions.' Our prayers are quite explicit: "You have chosen us from all peoples. . .you have sanctified us by your commandments and brought us near to Your service." The promise is not worldly success but quality of spirit, a sense that we're doing what we should be doing, a sense of the holiness of life.

- By those standards Judaism has not been particularly successful. I don't see that there's any correlation between attendance at services and virtue. My dad was only half jesting when he kidded mother about the gonifs in her family.

Not all Jews have been good, saintly, or even conscious of any special obligation, far from it. We've had our crooks - I just finished reading The Rise and Fall of the American Jewish Gangster - our fools and our fanatics; but history bears out that we've been a remarkably creative people over an incredibly long period of time. I'm convinced our track record wouldn't be what it is unless the Jewish people had interhalized a sense of election and historic purpose. God's choice laid on us a compelling sense of duty.

- Jews do feel themselves brighter and better. The way my grandparents used the term goy, it was the ultimate put-down.

In Biblical Hebrew goy simply meant a nation or people. At first Jews applied the term to themselves, goy kadosh, a holy people - but in time, and for want of a better expression, goy came to describe 'the others' and drew to itself all the resentments of an oppressed and misused people. Your parents must have come from Eastern Europe where though most Jews were as impoverished as the illiterate peasants who cursed them every day and beat them up when they were drunk, Jews maintained a literate and cultured society.

- It's never right to stereotype another group.

Don't be a Mr. Toc Good. Jewish existence was often a living hell. Understand goy as a form of catharsis, a necessary release of frustration, and remember, no rabbi ever defended goy as an estimable expression. The Torah insists that Jews should treat non-Jews with respect. "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." God was the Father of all peoples and all peoples merited His care.

- I don't hear goy any more, but some of the implied distance is still there. Look at the way Israelis treat the Arabs.

- Better than most Arab sheiks treat Arab peasants. I spent a year in Israel and there are restrictions, mostly born of security concerrs, not contempt. Some Israelis look down on Arabs. Many do not. Israel's Arabs are citizens.- Arab-owned-and-run newspapers, and Arab professors and students at the Hebrew University. I was a member of an activist group of Israelis who were pushing the government to relax the special identity checks to which Arabs had to submit. I wish we'd been more successful, but it's hard for people who have lived for nearly forty years under the threat of terrorist attack and military assault to dismantle what are seen to be necessary safeguards. Jordan's constitution specifically prohibits any Jew from becoming a citizen.

Some years ago I was asked to write A History of Judaism. Before I accepted the assignment I had to ask myself, why write such a book. I came to a simple answer: we had had a significant career. We've been around a long time, but longevity is not in itself interesting. The bedouin and the nomads of the world have been around a lot longer. It's been said, "Jews are like everyone else, only more so." It's the "more so" that interests me. Even people who don't like us admit our significance. Indeed, some scholars who've studied the causes of anti-semitism argue that one of its main components is jealousy of Jewish energies and abilities.

- I've a friend who says anti-semitism is our fault. We claim to be the chosen people. No one likes someone who feels superior.

It's interesting that this argument was first advanced by those who claimed that Christians were the New Israel, the newly chosen.

- What can we do about anti-semitism?

As Jews, nothing. It's their problem not ours. If all Jews were saints anti-semites would damn us for not being normal. Prejudices are immune to facts or reason. Prejudice seems to be a reflex of some primitive survival mechanisms. Animals protect their own against strays and strangers, and most human groups have a remarkably low tolerance of physical or cultural differences.

- Then any claims of distinction only encourage envy and invite misunderstanding.

Group distinction and distinctiveness encourage progress. The advantage of a pluralistic and democratic society is that some group is always ready to challenge what appears obvious to the majority and which, in fact, is not obvious at all but simply the conventional wisdom.

- So, vive la difference.

Praise significance rather than difference. Those who dye their hair orange are exhibitionists, not the catalysts of civilization.

- The Hare Krishna add a bit of color.

- So do Jews who make a big thing of playing baseball, wearing a yarmulke.

There's no benefit in flaunting distinction. Jews cover their heads to show respect and reverence, not as a team badge.

- To some baseball is a religion.

You won't find it mentioned in the Covenant.

- Since we're on the subject of distinction, I want to ask a question that's been bothering me since you gave us your functional definition of religion. You said religions are necessary but not necessarily good. Any religion which commands the allegience of a group is by your definition valid, functional. You seem to have no way of judging one religion healthy-minded and another destructive.

A relationship can be sick but within its own terms functional. We see this in certain marriages where the partner's needs and neuroses allow them to live together intimately but at the cost of their emotional growth or ethical maturity. A leader satisfies the dependency needs of his minions, but again, at the cost of their developing the capacity for independent living. Religious communities can be healthy-minded and encouraging or perverse and destructive.

Buddhism encourages asceticism and withdrawal. Medieval Christianity and Islam teach the damnation of noncommúnicants. One tradition encourages independent study and interpretation of its Scripture; another demands submission to ecclesiastical authority. A tradition like Judaism which encourages moral discipline, social justice, the cultivation of the mind, an individual's freedom under God, and the ties of human fellowship, has much to commend it.

- Everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe.

Of course, I need not approve his beliefs and, in some cases, I may need to protect myself and society from any dangerous actions his beliefs may lead him to take. I find the Hebrew term, le'havdil, useful in making these kinds of judgments and distinctions. In Hebrew when you wish to suggest that there are significant differences in quality or kind between phenomena of the same order you say le'havdil. So the sentence: Jim Jones, the charismatic leader who induced nearly a thousand followers to drink cyanide and, le'havdil, Martin Luther King were ministers who were active in the Civil Rights Movement; or the sentence: The Jonestown commune and, le'havdil, an Israeli kibbutz are examples of rural utopian communes. We make a le'havdil, an Israeli kibbutz are examples of rural utopian communes. We make a le'havdil judgment when we commit ourselves to a cause or a religious group.

- The Jonestown group was a cult, not a religion.

There's not that much difference between a cult and a religion. Because most Americans hold to the romantic notion that any religion is good for you, the media tends to reserve the term "religion" for approved traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism; and "cult" for the likes of the Moonies, the Church of God and the People's Temple, but the distinction is not that clear. Until the fatal day when the community drank cyanide, the People's Temple remained an accredited member of the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination.

- Cults are small groups of weak and dependent people who find it easier to obey a leader than to work out their own problems.

Some cults are composed of the weak and the troubled who are led by someone who knows The Truth, but not all. Cults are groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than most established congregations. The key element which distinguishes cult from religion is intensity. Most people have a family life and a work life as well as a religious life. The cultist is totally involved and unlikely to have any perspective on his group or its actions.

- You're describing a fanatic.

What one man will condemn as fanaticism another will describe as commendable zeal.

- Cults are dangerous.

Cults can be salutary or dangerous. It all depends on the beliefs around which the group has rallied, the leader who gains authority, and what subsequent generations make of their inheritance. Most cults are like Jonah's gourd: they appear one night and disappear the next. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become major religions.

- And all suffer from an excess of zeal.

- It's the zealous who change the course of history.

- And who chop off the heads of those who disagree.

- I've always been glad Judaism hasn't been as cult prone as Christianity or the Eastern religions.

- We've had our share. Habad is a Jewish cult. In their time so were the Pharisees, the Sabbateans, some of the Kabbalist groups. Some people always care more than others.

- I thought Judaism de-emphasized emotional intensity and enthusiastic faith. One of the lines I like best in our prayer book speaks of "zeal tempered by wisdom and guided by regard for other people's faith."

Cults emerge in times of stress. During the darkest period of the Middle Ages a passionate cult developed around the figure of a false messiah, Shabbetai Zvi. A significant number of Jews declared him the Messiah and some held fast

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Cults emerge in times of stress. During the darkest period of the Middle Ages a passionate cult developed around the figure of a false messiah, Shabbetai Zvi. A significant number of Jews declared him the Messiah and some held fast even when he converted to Islam. The "zeal tempered by wisdom" line was written by an American rabbi who lived during the calm and prosperous years which closed the nineteenth century. Of course, our leaders have always tried to keep passion in bounds, otherwise, like water breaking open an inadequate dam, everyone is in danger who happens to be in the path of the flood. When Shabbetai Zvi failed his followers, a goodly number committed suicide. Many more died inside.

- Judaism still has aspects of a cult. I'm always troubled when I hear the Akedah story read on Rosh Hashanah. God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham agrees to this unconscionable demand. Soren Kierkegaard used the Akedah in Fear and Trembling to illustrate his contention that the man of faith must be prepared to put aside family feeling and what is generally considered morality when he hears the commanding voice. If I remember correctly, he calls this attitude "a teleological suspension of the ethical." I call it fanaticism.

Kierkegaard read this story as a Christian. We read the story quite differently. In Judaism the Akedah myth served the same function as the crucifixion myth in Christianity which is to say it was the story which confirmed the religion's promise of redemption. Christians believe Jesus' death symbolized by the Cross atoned for Adam's sin and, for the first time, opened the way of salvation to human beings. Jews held that Abraham's submission to God's command earned for Abraham and his descendants a special place in the scheme of things, what theologians call Election. The Akedah myth symbolized and established God's special concern for Israel. A drawing of Abraham, Isaac, the altar, and the ram were sometimes painted on the wall above the Torah's niche which was a focus of worship in Greco-Roman synagogues in much the same way as the cross hangs above the altar in a church.

- But Abraham still obeyed a command to murder his son.

Jews were not to pattern their lives after the Patriarchs but to obey God's Instructions, the Commandments.

- Still, it's a confusing story. It gives the wrong idea. It certainly did to me.

Reading the Akedah on the High Holidays is an old practice which goes back to the difficult centuries when Jews felt it wise to remind God on the holiest day of the year that they could, in fact, depend on God's special relationship to pull them through.

- How do you explain the story to a modern audience?

Life often puts us to the test and when the issues are serious we must be willing to put our comforts at risk. I like to tell them the legend that the horn of the ram caught in the thicket is the shophar which will be blown to announce messianic times. In rabbinic hands this text became an optimistic message: beyond the risks inherent in life there is hope. I tell them not to be literalists. Biblical language is meant to be suggestive, not determinative.

I felt myself becoming professional, and suggested we might take a break. The suggestion was gratefully accepted.